DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 426 607 FL 025 652

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TITLE	Is English Changing?
INSTITUTION	Linguistic Society of America, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	1999-00-00
NOTE	6p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Diachronic Linguistics; Dialects; *English; *Grammatical Acceptability; *Language Patterns; Language Styles; *Language Variation; *Standard Spoken Usage
IDENTIFIERS	*Language Change

ABSTRACT

This brochure discusses, in lay terms, how languages change and how English in particular has gone through much alteration over the ages. It explains that languages change because: the needs of its speakers change; individual experience differs, and, therefore, the uses of language differ; new words are brought in from other languages or created within a language; word order shifts; and the sounds of a language shift over time. Specific examples of each are offered. The reader is encouraged to consider some changes clearly occurring in recent decades. The role that dialects and language variation play in language is discussed briefly, and it is noted that "standard" English is simply one dialect of English. (MSE)

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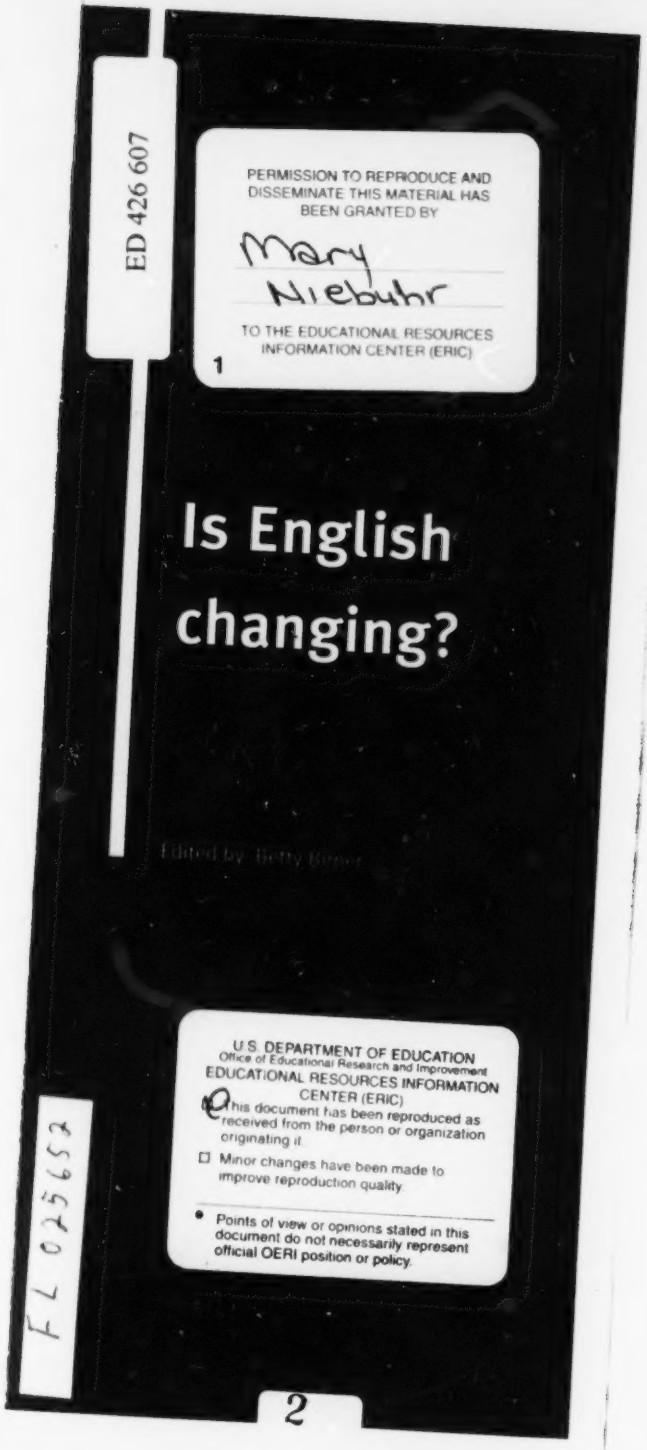
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1
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2

Is the English language changing?

Yes, and so is every other human language. Language is always changing, evolving, and adapting to the needs of its users. This isn't a bad thing; if English hadn't changed since, say, 1950, we wouldn't have words to refer to modems, fax machines, or cable TV. As long as the needs of language users continue to change, so will the language. The change is so slow that from year to year we hardly notice it (except to grumble every so often about the 'poor English' being used by the younger generation!). But reading Shakespeare's writings from the sixteenth century can be difficult. If you go back a couple more centuries, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* are very tough sledding, and if you went back another 500 years to try to read *Beowulf*, it would be like reading a different language.

Beowulf:
"Hwæt we Gar-Dena in geardagum..."
"Yes, we [of] Spear-Danes in days of yore..."

Canterbury Tales:
"Whan that Aprille with his shoures soote..."
"When April with its sweet showers..."

Why does language change?

Language changes for several reasons. First, it changes because the needs of its speakers change. New technologies, new products, and new experiences require new words to refer to them clearly and efficiently. Consider the fax machine: Originally it was called a *facsimile* machine, because it allowed one person to send another a copy, or facsimile, of a document. As the machines became more common, people began using the shorter form *fax* to refer to both the machine and the document; from there, it was just a short step to using the word *fax* as a verb (as in *I'll fax this over to Sylvia*).

Another reason for change is that no two people have had exactly the same language experience. We all know a slightly different set of words and constructions, depending on our age, job, education level, region of the country, and so on. We pick up new words and phrases from all the different people we talk with, and these combine to make something new and unlike any other person's particular way of speaking. At the same time, various groups in society use language as a way of marking their group identity — showing who is and isn't a member of the group. Many of the changes that occur in language begin with teens and young adults: As young people interact with others their own age, their language grows to include words, phrases, and constructions that are different from those of the older generation. Some have a short lifespan (heard *grocvy* lately?), but others stick around to affect the language as a whole.

We get new words from many different places. We borrow them from other languages (*sushi*, *chutzpah*), we create them by shortening longer words (*gym* from *gymnasium*) or by combining words (*brunch* from *breakfast* and *lunch*), and we make them out of proper names (*Levis*, *fahrenheit*). Sometimes we even create a new word by being wrong about the analysis of an existing word. That's how the word *pea* was created: Four hundred years ago, the word *pease* was used to refer to either a single pea or a bunch of them. But over time, people assumed that *pease* was a plural form, for which *pea* must be the singular, and a new word — *pea* — was born. (The same thing would happen if people began to think of the word *cheese* as referring to more than one *chee*.)

Word order also changes, though this process is much slower. Old English word order was much more 'free' than that of Modern English, and even comparing the Early Modern English of the King James Bible with today's English shows differences in word order. For example, the King James Bible translates Matthew 6:28 as "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not." In a more recent translation, the last phrase is translated as "they do not toil". English no longer places *not* after the verb in a sentence.

Finally, the sounds of a language change over time, too. About 500 years ago English began to undergo a major change in the way its vowels were pronounced. Before that, *geese* would have rhymed with today's pronunciation of *face*, while *mice* would have rhymed with today's *peace*. But then a 'Great Vowel Shift' began to occur,

during which the *ay* sound (as in *pay*) changed to *ee* (as in *fee*) in all the words containing it, while the *ee* sound changed to *i* (as in *pie*). In all, seven different vowel sounds were affected. If you've ever wondered why most other European languages spell the sound *ay* with an *e* (as in *fiance*) and the sound *ee* with an *i* (as in *aria*), it's because those languages didn't undergo the Great Vowel Shift. Only English did.

Wasn't English more elegant in Shakespeare's day?

People tend to think that older forms of language are more elegant, logical, or correct than modern forms, but it's just not true. The fact that language is always changing doesn't mean it's getting worse; it's just becoming different.

In Old English, a small winged creature with feathers was known as a *brid*. Over time, the pronunciation changed to *bird*. Although it's not hard to imagine children in the 1400s being scolded for 'slurring' *brid* into *bird*, it's clear that *bird* won out. Nobody today would suggest that *bird* is an incorrect word or a sloppy pronunciation.

The speech patterns of young people tend to grate on the ears of adults because they're unfamiliar. Also, new words and phrases are used in spoken or informal language sooner than in formal, written language, so it's true that the phrases you hear teenagers using may not yet be appropriate for business letters. But that doesn't mean they're worse — just newer. For years English teachers and newspaper editors argued that the word *hopefully* shouldn't be used to mean 'I hope' — as in *Hopefully, it won't rain today* — even though people frequently used it that way in informal speech. (And, of course nobody complained about other 'sentence adverbs' such as *frankly* and *actually*.) Now the battle against *hopefully* is all but lost, and it appears at the beginnings of sentences even in formal documents.

If you listen carefully, you can hear language change in progress. For example, *anymore* used to occur only in negative sentences: *I don't eat pizza anymore*. But now, in many areas of the country, it's being used in positive sentences: *I've been eating a lot of pizza anymore*. In this use, *anymore* means something like 'lately'. If that sounds odd to you now, keep listening; you may be hearing it in your neighborhood before long.

Why can't people just use correct English?

By 'correct English', people usually mean Standard English. Most languages have a standard form; it's the form of the language used in government, education, and other formal contexts. But Standard English is just one dialect of English.

What's important to realize is that there's no such thing as a 'sloppy' or 'lazy' dialect. Every dialect of every language has rules — not 'schoolroom' rules like 'don't split your infinitives', but rather the sorts of rules that tell us that *the cat slept* is a sentence of English, but *slept cat the* isn't. These rules tell us what language **is** like rather than what it **should** be like.

Different dialects have different rules. For example:

(1) I didn't eat any dinner.

(2) I didn't eat no dinner.

Sentence (1) follows the rules of Standard English; sentence (2) follows a set of rules present in several other dialects. But neither is sloppier than the other; they just differ in the rule for making a negative sentence. In (1), *dinner* is marked as negative with *any*; in (2), it's marked as negative with *no*. The rules are different, but neither is more logical or elegant than the other. In fact, Old English regularly used 'double negatives', parallel to what we see in (2), and many modern languages, including Italian and Spanish, either allow or require more than one negative word in a sentence. Sentences like (2) only sound 'bad' if you didn't happen to grow up speaking a dialect that uses them.

You may have been taught to avoid 'split infinitives', as in (3):

(3) I was asked to thoroughly water the garden.

This is said to be 'ungrammatical' because *thoroughly* 'splits' the infinitive to *water*. Why are split infinitives so bad? Here's why: Seventeenth-century grammarians believed Latin was the ideal language,

so they thought English should be as much like Latin as possible. In Latin, an infinitive like *to water* is a single word; it's impossible to split it up. So today, 300 years later, we're still being taught that sentences like (3) are wrong — all because someone in the 1600s thought English should be more like Latin.

Here's one last example. Over the past few decades, three new ways of reporting speech have appeared:

(4) So Karen goes, "Wow — I wish I'd been there!"

(5) So Karen is like, "Wow — I wish I'd been there!"

(6) So Karen is all, "Wow — I wish I'd been there!"

In (4), *goes* means pretty much the same thing as *said*; it's used for reporting Karen's actual words. In (5), *is like* means the speaker is telling us **more** or **less** what Karen said. If Karen had used different words for the same basic idea, (5) would be appropriate, but (4) would not. Finally, *is all* in (6) is a fairly new construction. In most of the areas where it's used, it means something similar to *is like*, but with extra emotion. If Karen had simply been reporting the time, it would be okay to say *She's like, "It's five o'clock"*, but odd to say *She's all, "It's five o'clock"* — unless there was something exciting about it being five o'clock.

A lazy way of talking? Not at all; the younger generation has made a useful three-way distinction where we previously only had the word *said*. Language will never stop changing; it will continue to respond to the needs of the people who use it. So the next time you hear a new phrase that grates on your ears, remember that, like everything else in nature, the English language is a work in progress.

For further information

Aitcheson, Jean. 1991. **Language Change: Progress or Decay?** Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bryson, Bill. 1991. **Mother Tongue: The English Language.** New York: Penguin Books.

THE LINGUISTIC SOCIETY OF AMERICA was founded in 1924 for the advancement of the scientific study of language. The Society serves its nearly 7,000 personal and institutional members through scholarly meetings, publications, and special activities designed to advance the discipline.

The Society holds its Annual Meeting in early January each year and publishes a quarterly journal, LANGUAGE and the LSA Bulletin. Among its special education activities are the Linguistic Institutes held every other summer in odd numbered years and co-sponsored by a host university.

The web site for the Society (http://www.lsadc.org) includes a Directory of Programs in Linguistics in the United States and Canada, The Field of Linguistics (brief, non-technical essays describing the discipline and its sub-fields), and statements and resolutions issued by the Society on matters such as language rights, the English only/English plus debate, bilingual education, and ebonics.

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